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AUTHOR Knapczyk, Dennis R.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a guide for developing and supervising field-based practicum activities to support training of special educators working in rural communities. Particular attention is given to organizing and overseeing practicum experiences that prepare teachers for integrating students with mild learning and behavior problems into regular education programs. The paper uses the graduate teacher training program in special education at Indiana University as an example of how high-quality practicum experiences can be offered to trainees teaching in rural communities. Activities for devising field experiences to support a teacher training program include establishing aims and goals and listing competencies associated with those goals. Field-based projects should be consistent with program competencies and training materials should permit trainees to progress through activities with a minimum of direction. Strategies for supervising field experiences should be flexible enough to accommodate differences among activities and projects. This document includes 12 references, 2 tables, and 2 organizational charts. (TES)

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Design and Supervision of Field-Based Practicum Experiences
in Rural Communities

Dr. Dennis R. Knapczyk
(Indiana University)

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Dr. Dennis R. Knapczyk
Department of Special Education
Smith Research Center 170
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47401

Design and Supervision of Field-Based Practicum Experiences in Rural Training Sites

INTRODUCTION

Designing a coherent set of experiences through which trainees develop competencies related to job performance is a primary goal of teacher training programs. Although there are many ways to achieve this goal, all effective models of training are characterized by a high degree of correspondence between the academic (information provision) and practicum (application) components. That is, once trainees have mastered the basic principles that form the content of training, they should participate in field experiences where they learn to apply the principles to the demands of their teaching positions and learn to adapt them to the conditions of their work environment (Marrs, 1984; Pagny, 1983). Thus, during their field experiences, trainees must practice skills under controlled conditions, in a logical order, with adequate feedback about their performance, and to a mastery level (Treadway, 1984). Closely coordinated academic and field components can serve many functions that enhance the quality of training. Some of these functions include: (1) facilitate structuring a "field referenced" approach to training; (2) permit deliberate sequencing of training activities; (3) foster interdependence and continuity among training experiences; and (4) enhance precision of trainee feedback, program monitoring, and evaluation.

Creating practicum experiences that help to accomplish the outcomes listed above is particularly important in training programs for special educators who teach in rural communities (Helge, 1984). Such factors as the diversity of roles assigned to special class teachers, separation of trainers and trainees, and diffusion of trainees across the program catchment area increase the importance of providing highly organized practicum experiences (O'Connor & Rotatori, 1987; Pelton, 1983). To support field experience activities, teacher training programs should also devise a system of communication with trainees that can (1) supply information about a wide range of trainee performance measures, (2) offer an effective way of determining the degree to which trainees display program competencies in their teaching assignments, (3) provide immediate feedback and remedial training options to trainees, and (4) permit comprehensive formative and

summative evaluation of training competencies and program components. High quality supervision of practicum experiences requires an effective means of establishing two-way communication links between trainers and training sites (Treadway, 1984).

This paper presents a guide for developing and supervising field-based practicum activities to support training of special educators who are teaching in rural communities. Particular attention is given to organizing and overseeing practicum experiences that prepare teachers in practices related to integration into regular education programs of students who exhibit mild learning and behavior problems (i.e., students with mild mental retardation and learning disabilities and other "at risk" learners). The paper uses the graduate teacher training program in special education at Indiana University to show how high quality practicum experiences can be offered to trainees teaching in rural communities.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S GRADUATE TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM

The Department of Special Education at Indiana University in Bloomington provides graduate level training to persons seeking endorsements to teach in public school special education programs. Training options are available for teachers who have completed requirements for elementary, secondary, or all-grade special education teaching licenses. The Department of Special Education offers coursework leading to endorsements in learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and behavior disorders. The training program views the role of special educators as one of developing, implementing, and evaluating instructional programs that (1) facilitate movement into regular education settings of students receiving special services, and (2) providing assistance to students and teachers in regular education settings so that students succeed and are retained in those settings. The training program is oriented toward the position that special education services should be transitory in nature and special educators should act as program managers, consultants, and change agents rather than as traditional classroom teachers. Trainees participating in the program typically are full time practicing regular or special class teachers who work in rural communities located throughout southern Indiana and attend coursework as part-time students. They complete a one-semester practicum course (3 credit hours) as part of their endorsement requirements; enroll in the course after completing at least nine credits in their major area (a survey course and two methods courses); and perform practicum activities in their assigned classrooms and school buildings.

DEVISING FIELD EXPERIENCES

Figure 1 presents the sequence of activities for devising field experiences to support a teacher training program. This

Insert figure 1 about here

section describes each step in the sequence and provides examples of how the steps are carried out in the context of the graduate training program at Indiana University.

A. Establish aim of training program.

The aim of the program specifies what the program expects to accomplish as a result of providing training experiences to its students. That is, the statement of aim should indicate the role(s) that graduates will be prepared to assume after they have completed the program.

AIM OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM: To prepare teachers who can develop instructional programs through which students systematically progress from reliance on special education services to self-reliance and successful performance in regular education settings.

B. Specify goals of training program.

The goals of the training program should be consistent with its aim. The goals should specify in some detail the major responsibilities that graduates will be able to carry out upon completion of their training.

GOALS OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM:

1. Graduates will be able to evaluate and, where necessary, to improve the quality of instruction delivered to students in special education settings.

2. Graduates will be able to develop and implement programs of instruction through which students currently receiving special education services are taught to successfully participate in regular education settings.

3. Graduates will be able to monitor and improve the performance of students mainstreamed into regular education settings so that students retain their placements in them.

C. List competencies associated with training goals.

The competencies specify the major areas of performance required of trainees to achieve the goals of the program. They serve as outcome statements for the content areas that will be the focus of training activities. That is, competencies indicate

the skill areas and teaching practices that the training program will address. They guide identification and organization of information and practicum components of the program.

In terms of sequencing experiences that comprise the training program, information components will usually precede practicum components. That is, trainees will be expected to complete a predetermined set of academic coursework before enrolling in their practicum. However, with regard to program development, it is best to specify the teaching skills and practices that trainees are to display in the field either before or at the same time as specifying course content. That is, a primary function of the information component of a program is to give trainees an opportunity to master prerequisite and lead-up skills associated with the teaching practices they will display in their practicum. Without first ascertaining the practices that are the focus of training, it will not be possible to develop a complete description of the prerequisite and lead-up skills that pertain to the practices.

COMPETENCIES OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM: The graduate program at Indiana University has used a curriculum-based instructional model to select program competencies. A curriculum-based approach is one in which assessment and teaching strategies are derived from the curriculum of classrooms that constitute least restrictive settings for students, i.e., regular education settings (Blankenship & Lilly, 1981; Lovitt & Hansen, 1976; Tucker, 1985). Curriculum-based approaches proceed from the view that a primary function of special education services for students with mild learning and behavior problems is to "raise student performance to the same level of curricular skill as students in regular classes" (Howell & Morehead, 1987). For purposes of identifying training competencies, the term "curriculum" was used to denote the wide range of skills students must exhibit to meet the expectations of regular education settings. Included as skill areas for instruction are: (1) academic achievement and subject matter skills; (2) skills associated with participation in instructional activities; (3) organizational strategies and study habits; (4) social skills; and (5) skills associated with self-management and motivation. Figure 2 lists the competencies for preparing teachers to use a curriculum-based instructional approach.

Insert Figure 2 about here

D. Devise field-based projects.

The activities that trainees engage in in their practicum should be consistent with program competencies. That is, assigned

activities should give trainees opportunities to apply the concepts and principles associated with program competencies and learn to adapt them to fit the characteristics of their students. The field experiences should also promote synthesis of concepts and principles into teaching practices that are incorporated into the trainee's teaching repertoire. Therefore, the activities should be comprehensive enough to allow trainees to demonstrate mastery of skills related to individual competencies and foster integration of related competency areas into practices that are pertinent to their teaching positions. One way of achieving these effects is to devise field-based projects in which trainees use a problem-solving approach to identify circumstances in their programs that need attention and to generate and evaluate solutions or interventions that address the problem areas. In this manner trainees will have an opportunity to both practice skills related to program competencies and improve the overall quality of their instructional assignments.

FIELD EXPERIENCE PROJECTS IN INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM:

Trainees are required to complete two projects in their practicum:

Project 1. Trainees prepare an intervention plan that assists the entry and retention of students in regular education settings. Completing the project requires: (1) identifying requirements for entry and retention in regular education in selected areas or grade levels, (2) developing assessment procedures for requirement areas, (3) assessing the performance of specific students, and (4) preparing an intervention plan that will assist students in meeting requirements.

Project 2. Trainees devise, implement, and evaluate an intervention program that improves the performance of students in one of the following skill areas:

- a. Academic achievement and subject matter skills
- b. Skills related to participation in instructional activities
- c. Organizational strategies and study habits
- d. Social skills
- e. Skills related to self-management and motivation

Completing the project requires: (1) selecting a subset of skills pertinent to students in the program; (2) analyzing the skills into subskills, lead-up skills, and prerequisites; (3) assessing performance of specific students; (4) devising, implementing, and evaluating an intervention that promotes acquisition, maintenance, and generalization of skills.

E. Prepare training materials to guide field experiences.

Training materials that support the practicum should be

detailed and comprehensive enough to permit trainees to progress through activities with a minimum of direction or need for clarification. The materials should (1) communicate the expectations and outcomes for practicum experiences or projects, (2) facilitate organization and performance of requisite activities, and (3) promote communication between trainees and supervisors for purposes of feedback, additional training, and evaluation. One way of achieving these effects is to prepare materials that include the following:

1. Case study or scenario that gives examples of problems or situations that trainees are likely to encounter in their teaching positions. This section can provide background information for projects, give a context or referent for activities, and describe practicum outcomes.
2. List of guidelines for projects or activities that establishes the expectations for performance, describes the scope of activities, and specifies performance standards and evaluation criteria.
3. Task analysis that outlines a sequence of steps for project completion. The analysis can operationalize training goals in terms of field-related activities, show how program competencies are integrated into teaching practices, and guide trainee performance of projects.
4. List of trainee outputs for practicum activities that assists trainees in organizing and pacing their performance and specifies products required for project and course completion. Trainee outputs can provide the context for performance feedback, additional training, and formative evaluation.
5. List of supervisor outputs that outlines the responsibilities of practicum supervisors. The list of outputs can facilitate monitoring and coordination of field training activities. This list can also help assure that trainees will receive feedback and assistance as it is needed.

If training materials include the information listed above, they can serve as both a contract between trainees and trainers regarding expectations for fulfilling course requirements and a means for establishing and maintaining lines of communication that ensures high quality supervision and monitoring of field activities.

TRAINING MATERIALS USED IN INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM: Before they begin their field experience, trainees are given a set of materials for each of the projects they select. These materials include the information described above. For example, the scenario for Project 1 describes concerns a group of regular class teachers have regarding procedures

for recommending special class students for placement in regular classes. Their concerns are presented to the building principal. The principal, in turn, asks the special (or regular) class teacher (i.e., the practicum student) to devise and field test a more effective way of deciding which students exhibit the skills needed to enter and be retained in regular education settings, and preparing instructional program plans that assist the students in identified deficiency areas.

The guidelines for this project provide information about (1) referents used for identifying skills required for entry and retention; (2) sample size of the students used in the project; (3) settings in which activities take place; (4) number and type of school personnel who serve as resources for activities; (5) amount of detail involved in completing activities; and (6) comprehensiveness of plans, materials, reports, and other products to be completed as part of the project.

Table 1 provides an example of a task analysis that specifies steps for the first major activity in Project 1. Table 1 also lists trainee and supervisor outputs for the steps.

Insert Table 1 about here

F. Devise strategies for supervision of field experiences.

Procedures for supervising field experiences should be flexible enough to accommodate differences among the activities and projects that trainees select. For example, even though trainees may choose the same projects for their practicum, differences in the characteristics of their students and schools and diversity in their preferences and expertise can result in significant variations in the field activities they perform. In addition, methods of communication between trainers and trainees should be sufficiently broad to handle the various forms of information that need to be transmitted and do so without the information being delayed or hampered by distances between training and field sites. Table 2 provides a listing of several methods for communicating information about practicum experiences. Table 2 also describes some advantages and limitations of each method.

Insert Table 2 about here

STRATEGIES FOR SUPERVISION USED IN INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM:
Before they enroll in their practicum, trainees are given a

complete set of training materials for review. They are asked to select projects and begin planning activities in relation to areas or conditions in their instructional programs that need closer attention. During the first week of classes, they meet as a group with the field supervisor to clarify course expectations and grading criteria, present examples of projects, and discuss supervision guidelines and procedures. The field supervisor schedules a visitation to each practicum site, observes the trainee on site, and discusses student and program characteristics. The trainee and supervisor then review plans and set timelines for completing the projects. Following the first site visit, monitoring of trainee performance comprises occasional telephone conversations and periodic progress reports and work samples delivered by mail, reviewed by the supervisor, and returned by mail. One or two additional site visits or conferences are made during the semester. These are primarily directed towards reviewing projects in their various stages of completion and providing formative or summative evaluation of trainee performance. In general, limitations in time, distance, and communication medium hamper the ability of the supervisor to assess and remediate training deficiencies, provide feedback about performance, and create opportunities for addressing generalization of teaching principles and practices to other program areas. However, through a grant recently received from A.T. & T., work is in progress towards investigating the use of audio-graphic technology, (i.e., A.T. & T.'s PC Overview Scanners), to facilitate supervision of field experiences in off-campus training sites. The Scanners permit simultaneous transmission of voice and document, graphic, or text files. In addition, the information communicated can be reviewed and edited in "real" time, e.g., trainee and trainer can transmit, discuss, evaluate, and revise assessment results or intervention plans as they are sent across phone lines (Chalmers, 1988; Chute & Balthazar, 1987). It is expected that complementing well-organized practicum activities with technical advances in communication will greatly enhance the quality of field experiences offered to trainees in rural communities.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Organizing and supervising the field experience component of a training program are very complex tasks. These activities are particularly problematic in instances where trainees are located in rural communities some distance from the training facility. Limitations in time, resources, and communication medium greatly hamper direct contact with trainees and restrict use of immediate feedback as an instructional tool. Achieving high quality training under these circumstances requires preparing well-planned and highly organized training activities and generating

an array of options for obtaining information about trainee performance and monitoring acquisition of program competencies.

Table 1. Task analysis of first steps for Project 1 and lists of trainee and supervisor outputs.

<u>STEPS IN PROJECT COMPLETION</u>	<u>TRAINEE OUTPUTS</u>	<u>SUPERVISOR OUTPUTS</u>
1. Develop procedures for determining requirements for participation in regular education programs		
1.1 Select grade and content areas for which requirements will be determined	1a. Indicate grade and content areas on which the project will focus	1a. Approve preliminary plan to obtain information
1.2 Select and contact personnel who will supply information about requirements	1b. Provide list of personnel who will supply information about requirements	1b. Approve preliminary plan to obtain information
1.3 Decide upon the types of information needed to determine requirements	1c. Outline the types of information that will be solicited	1c. Review outline of information to be solicited and suggest revisions, if needed
1.4 Develop procedures for obtaining information about requirements		
1.5 Devise recording devices, surveys, interview questions, and observation forms for obtaining information	1d. Supply samples of survey documents, questionnaires, interview forms used for obtaining information	1d. Examine survey documents, interview forms, questionnaires, etc. and assist in revisions, if needed
1.6 Prepare a timeline for distributing forms, scheduling interviews, making observations, and examining materials that are part of information gathering plan	1e. Provide timeline for implementation of procedures	1e. Give confirmation of timeline for obtaining information

Table 2. Methods of communication for practicum supervision and their advantages and limitations.

METHODS	ADVANTAGES/LIMITATIONS
Field site visitations	Allows trainees to give a general overview of student and program characteristics Allows trainees to demonstrate skills or products in natural settings and receive feedback or remedial training from supervisor Limited by frequency of use
Meetings/conferences	Allows trainees to obtain clarification of assigned activities Permits detailed discussion of steps to project completion Allows comprehensive feedback about performance and products Limited by frequency of use
Mail	Allows trainees to submit progress reports or examples products and activities Provides opportunities for detailed feedback and evaluation of performance Limited by time delay and usefulness as a remedial training option

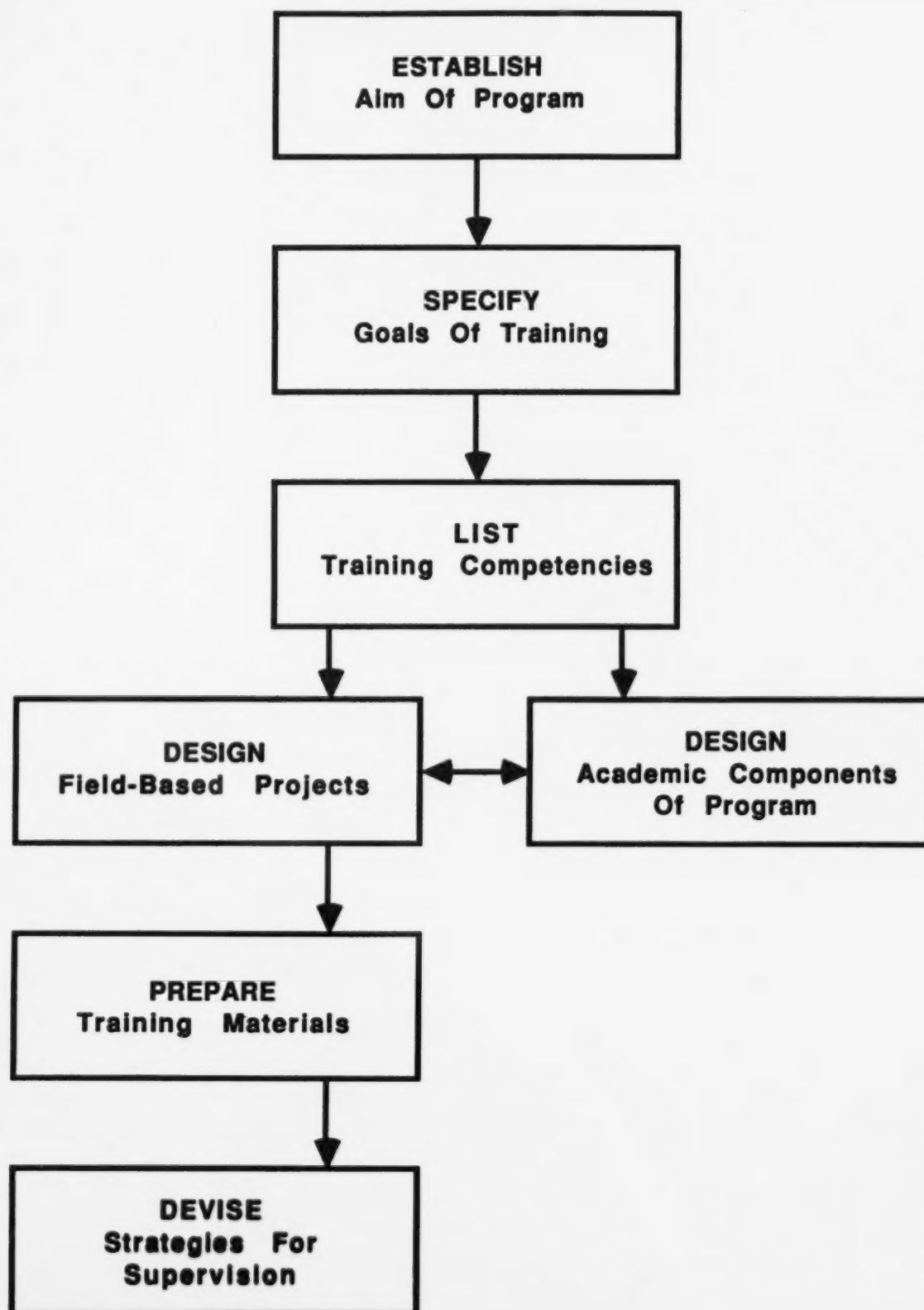
Table 2. Continued

Fax/ Electronic mail	Same advantages of mail service
	Limited by accessibility to trainees
Phone calls/ Teleconferencing	Permits clarification of guidelines and specific activities
	Allows for generalized feedback and monitoring
	Provides a useful adjunct to mailed documents
	Permits sharing of information and "brain storming" among groups of trainees working on common projects
	Limited by amount and type of information that can be communicated and work schedules of trainer and trainee
PC Audio-graphic scanners	Permits simultaneous transmission of text, documents, and graphic information in "real" time
	Allows immediate feedback and remedial training
	Combines advantages of phone and mail without time delay
	Limited by accessibility to trainers and trainees. Best placed in regional sites and networked to trainees in- class computers

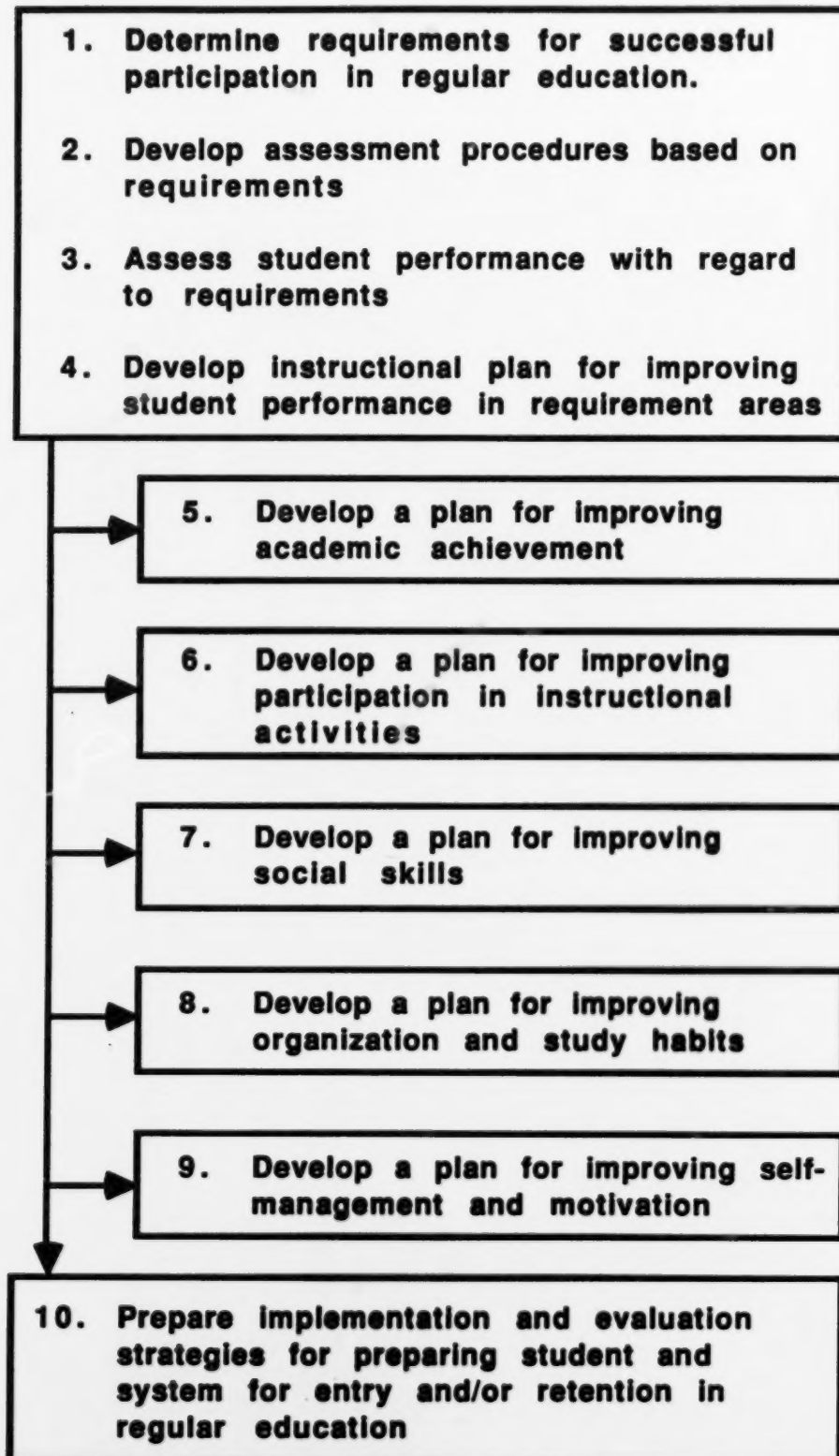
FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Sequence of steps in devising field experiences.

Figure 2. Program competencies of Indiana University's program.



COMPETENCIES



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